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Review of *Violent Intimacies: The Trans Everyday and the Making of an Urban World* by Aslı Zengin (Duke University Press)

by Avik Sarkar | Book Reviews, Issue 14.1 (Spring 2025)

ABSTRACT Aslı Zengin's *Violent Intimacies* theorizes the fraught encounter between the Turkish state and its trans subjects. Introducing the analytic framework of "violent intimacies," Zengin advances two main claims: structural violence unfolds through intimate contact with gendered bodies, and trans women, in turn, confront this violence with intimate practices of resistance. Zengin's work marks a significant intervention within trans studies. She pays close attention to the materiality of the body as the location where violence is both enacted and contested—a welcome departure from the tendency towards abstraction in trans theoretical production. She also pushes the field in transnational directions to address experiences of gender transgression beyond North America and Western Europe. A rich ethnography of trans life in Turkey, the text depicts everyday scenes of violent intimacies across several interpersonal and institutional settings: the street, police, medicine, law, and family. *Violent Intimacies* offers a vibrant account of Turkish trans women who—faced with state neglect and social exclusion—envision alternative ways of building worlds and sustaining life.

KEYWORDS Turkey, ethnography, intimacy, trans studies, violence

Violent Intimacies: The Trans Everyday and the Making of an Urban World. By Aslı Zengin. Durham, NC and London, UK: Duke University Press, 2024, 296 pp. (paperback). ISBN 978-1-4780-2562-7. US List: $27.95.

Violent intimacies: an oxymoron? If intimacy is world-forming, then violence is world-shattering. In her new book, Aslı Zengin engages the productive tension

between violence and intimacy to theorize the fraught encounter between the Turkish state and its trans subjects. Introducing the analytic framework of "violent intimacies," Zengin advances two main claims: structural violence unfolds through intimate, corporeal, visceral contact with gendered bodies; and trans women, in turn, resist this violence with intimate practices of kinship, sociality, and belonging. Zengin's work marks a significant intervention within trans studies. A uniquely interdisciplinary study, *Violent Intimacies* brings the field into generative conversation with urban geography, the political anthropology of violence, and transnational feminist and queer critique. Zengin also contributes to the ongoing project of expanding the scope of knowledge production in trans studies by attending to experiences of gender transgression beyond North America and Western Europe. A rich ethnography of trans life in Turkey, the text depicts everyday scenes of violent intimacies across several interpersonal and institutional settings: the street, police, medicine, law, and family.

The first two chapters investigate questions of space, revealing the *longue durée* of spatial violence against trans women. In chapter one, Zengin meticulously traces histories of forced mobility within and beyond the urban centers of Istanbul. In the early 1980s, police apprehended trans people en masse and deported them from the capital to the middle of the country. In recent years, displacement has taken new but, as Zengin emphasizes, no less violent forms. Gentrification, urban renewal, and the influx of neoliberal capital collectively endanger trans women's access to "the street as a public good" (202). Even when spatially marginalized, however, they develop intimate strategies of place making and community gathering; they maintain "safe zones" such as the organization Istanbul LGBTT, which provide a degree of stability amid conditions of precarity (65). As Zengin illustrates, trans women labor tirelessly to transform the violence of displacement into the intimacy of emplacement.

Continuing this line of inquiry into spatial violence, chapter two examines the policing of trans bodies. According to one of Zengin's informants, Turkish law

enforcement penalizes trans women merely for going outside. Their very existence in public space is grounds for criminalization, and they become hypervisible as targets of police surveillance. Paradoxically, Zengin points out, trans women's visibility as objects of the carceral gaze increases in direct proportion to their invisibility "as ordinary subjects in everyday life" (93). To disappear trans presence from public life, the police deploy extralegal techniques of violence: torture, kidnapping, indefinite detention. Drawing from Walter Benjamin, who characterizes the police's function as simultaneously law-preserving and law-making, this chapter presents an incisive critique of police brutality (which, I would note, is itself a redundant phrase). It is no surprise nor contradiction, Zengin reminds us, that the very institution evidently charged with upholding the law would disobey it. Rather, extralegal force represents the foundation—not an anomaly—of the police.

Beaten, stripped, and sexually abused, trans women are exposed to especially obscene technologies of discipline. The "intensely felt proximity" between trans women and police officers, Zengin suggests, is an expression of violent intimacy; indeed, violence is experienced intimately—in, on, and throughout the body (78). Likewise, trans women's tactics of resistance center the body, harnessing its capacity for disruption. Zengin narrates the striking story of Zeren, a trans woman who, while held in custody, cut off her own penis and threw it at a police chief notorious for terrorizing trans women. With this radical gesture, which we might interpret as a gender-affirming act, Zeren stages her body as the site of defiant protest against police violence.

The following two chapters delve deeper into issues of embodiment, turning to the violent intimacies of the gender confirmation process in the entangled domains of law and medicine. Chapter three rehearses the psychiatric history of transsexuality and the institutional management of this category in Turkey. In order to change the marker on their state identification cards, trans people are subjected to invasive procedures that claim to collect evidence of their "true,"

authentic gender. Legal recognition can be bestowed only after psychiatrists have evaluated and assessed the most intimate details of a person's life to determine if they can satisfactorily perform gender norms—which is to say, if they can pass. Zengin argues that by carefully, almost obsessively supervising and observing trans bodies, the state exercises what Foucault calls its productive power. That is, it produces "desirable" subjects who must adhere to a singular trajectory of transition, which necessarily culminates in a cisnormative "ideal." Medicolegal scrutiny leaves no room for differences and multiplicities, repeatedly enacting "institutionalized violence" and "infiltrating intimate accounts . . . of trans embodiment" (129).

Chapter four furthers this critique of medicolegal regulation in Turkey, focusing on dimensions of touch, feeling, and the sensorium. To legally transition after gender confirmation surgery, trans women must be inspected by medical authorities who decide if their vaginas are "deep enough" (130). The state's definition of the female body, then, is entirely contingent upon its availability for vaginal penetration. The "heteropenetrative state"—Zengin's evocative term—exerts its authority and enforces heteronormativity by violently touching the most intimate zones of trans feminine bodies (137). Paying close attention to the body and the senses, Zengin's materialist approach is a welcome departure from the tendency towards abstraction in contemporary trans thought.

The final two chapters confront the ongoing devastation of trans femicides. Turkish activists frame these tragic murders as hate crimes and human rights abuses; insisting that anti-trans violence is structural rather than sporadic, they implicate the state and the criminal legal system within so-called "individual" acts. In particular, advocates demand an end to the legal defense of "unjust provocation"—akin to the "trans panic defense"—used by assailants who claim that they were driven to violence by the discovery of a trans partner's "actual" sex (152). Zengin situates activist efforts within a broader context, where legal paradigms of recognition and protection circulate transnationally among

queer/trans movements. Without dismissing the importance of these struggles, she also foregrounds the limits of the law as a means of attaining justice. Hate crime legislation extends the reach of state control, requires and reproduces fictions of the perfect victim, and perhaps most crucially, can address violence only *after* it has already occurred. If the law cannot be relied upon to deliver justice, how else might we envision the potential for repair?

Reflecting on this question, the sixth chapter turns to funerals as intimate sites of trans kinship. Since trans people in Turkey are so often abandoned by their families, their friends take on the responsibility of organizing their funeral ceremonies. These practices of care "contest the primacy given to blood families" and experiment with alternative ways of belonging and relating to others (171). Trans women reappropriate conventional concepts of home and motherhood for their own purposes—for cultivating their own modes of kinship. They imagine home not within the domestic realm, but rather in social, political, and community organizing spaces, where older trans women serve as maternal figures. These intergenerational friendships and affinities provide the conditions of possibility for trans survival and vitality.

Violent Intimacies documents Turkish trans women's creative methods of reckoning with the regimes of violence that they suffer on a daily basis. Zengin offers us a glimpse of the manifold bonds of sociality and networks of solidarity that sustain trans life in a world fragmented by state neglect and exclusion—the intimacies that emerge from violence and endure despite it.

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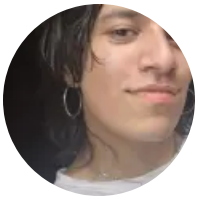

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Avik Sarkar investigates the aesthetics, erotics, and politics of transsexual life. She is especially interested in trans legal theory, trans feminist thought, and trans of color critique. Avik has presented her work at Lancaster University, the Hunter Museum of American Art, the Center for the Study of Women at UCLA, and the Connecticut Ethnic Studies Symposium. She graduated from Yale magna cum laude with distinction in women's, gender, and sexuality studies and a certificate of advanced language study in French. Her thesis was supported by the Bruce L. Cohen LGBT Studies Research Award. Avik is currently at work on an archival project published in spring 2025—supported by a research fellowship from the nonprofit arts organization Visual AIDS—about the late San Francisco-based artist Miss Kitty Litter. This year she is pursuing a master's at Oxford, fully funded by the Clarendon Scholarship, and in fall 2025 she will begin legal studies at Harvard.

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